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FM AMCONSUL ISTANBUL  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7686  
INFO RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 7276  
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0042  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

UNCLAS ISTANBUL 001005

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKISH SECURITY CHALLENGES: DOMESTIC PRESSURES  
AND KURDISH AUTONOMY

1.(SBU) On November 8, ARI Movement -- an independent Turkish NGO promoting civil society participation in both domestic and international affairs -- held a conference on Turkish security challenges: the likelihood of a Turkish military incursion into Northern Iraq, the changing domestic political balance within Turkey, and the future of regional security. The conference, held at Bilgi University in Istanbul, was timed to correspond with the release of the new Turkish Policy Quarterly issue concerning the same topics. While the speakers were varied and impressive, it was the commentary by Turkish media personality Mehmet Ali Birand, former Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin, and University professor Soli Ozel, which best illustrates the complexities behind the decision to conduct a cross-border operation (CBO) and the ramifications such an operation would have on long-term regional security.

2.(SBU) Mehmet Ali Birand, Turkish media personality and regular columnist for the Turkish Daily News, claimed Prime Minister Erdogan told him, following the November 5 meeting with President Bush, that while he is satisfied with the assurances he was given in Washington, he is preoccupied with public pressure calling for military action against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Iraq. The situation, Birand said, is further complicated by a frustrated military; they want to show their strength, yet they realize even a successful CBO will not live up to public expectations (i.e. the end of PKK terrorism). The only way the military can both avoid conducting a CBO and save face is to have the administration order them to stand down, according to Birand. This is unlikely to happen when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) is concerned with the same need to appear strong before its grumbling constituents.

3.(SBU) Hikmet Cetin, former Turkish Foreign Minister and former NATO Senior Civilian Representative to Afghanistan, spoke of Turkey's need to move forward on Iraq. "It is not constructive to speak against the United States' presence in Iraq; they are there," he said. Rather, one should talk about how Turkey, as a nation and as a NATO member, can help to achieve a peaceful outcome. Cetin noted, "...it is evident that a federation, within a unified Iraq, will ultimately have to be tolerated." He added that despite short-term animosity towards the idea, Turkey has to plan long-term for regional stability. He suggested that any military action should be coupled with social programming in the South East, tax incentives for business development, and similar actions.

4.(SBU) Soli Ozel, a professor at Bilgi University, agreed with Cetin that an autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq was inevitable: "It appears that the U.S. will not sell out the

Kurds this time, so what is left but federalism?" He went on to say that in the end Turkey's decision to either accept or to reject the idea of federalism in Iraq would be based on Turkish interests -- part of a domestic rebalancing between East and West. As a part of that shift, Turkey is learning to depend more on itself and its neighbors in the East, rather than on Western powers, said Ozel. "When the military issued its midnight e-posta, there was very little pressure on the military from the European Union (EU) and the U.S. was nowhere to be found. It was domestic pressure, in the form of overwhelming support for AKP, that made the military back down, and it will be domestic pressure that pushes for the acceptance of an autonomous region."

5.(SBU) COMMENT: While participants discussed a variety of security issues initially, talk of a CBO soon monopolized the conversation. The discussion regarding domestic stability in Turkey was couched in terms of conducting a CBO and whether the AKP government and/or military could continue to deny popular calls to strike the PKK in Iraq. The future of U.S.-Turkey and E.U.-Turkey relations were also viewed through the CBO prism. Lastly, even Hikmet Cetin -- a proponent of long-term planning -- was only willing to discuss long-term stabilization of the South East and of Northern Iraq in conjunction with, as opposed to apart from, military engagement. In this case, the elite appear to reflect the people: their fears, their demands, and perhaps their short-sightedness. END COMMENT

WIENER